

A person wearing a black hooded garment is holding a camera, looking towards the right. The background is a dark, stylized world map with a blue and purple color scheme.

# Graphikā

## Lights, Camera, Coordinated Action!

A Network of Fake Media Outlets Paid  
Actors and Journalists to Spread Political  
Narratives Supporting Pakistan's  
Government and Military

Léa Ronzaud, Ira Hubert, C. Shawn Eib,  
Avneesh Chandra, Jack Stubbs, Lotus Ruan,  
Joseph Carter

**06.2021**

**Takedowns**

# Lights, Camera, Coordinated Action!

## A Network of Fake Media Outlets Paid Actors and Journalists to Spread Political Narratives Supporting Pakistan's Government and Military

*Léa Ronzaud, Ira Hubert, C. Shawn Eib, Avneesh Chandra, Jack Stubbs, Lotus Ruan, Joseph Carter*

### Executive Summary

On June 3, Facebook [said](#) it had removed a network of accounts and pages in May that originated in Pakistan and engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” to target domestic audiences, as well as English, Pashto, and Arabic speakers internationally. The network consisted of 40 Facebook profiles, 25 pages, six groups and 28 Instagram accounts, many of which used fake personas or posed as independent media outlets to post about news and current events with a clear political agenda. “Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with AlphaPro, a Pakistan-based PR firm,” Facebook said.

Facebook said it found some links between the new network and a separate set of accounts [removed](#) in 2019 that was [attributed](#) to employees of the Pakistani military’s Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) department. Graphika found no direct connections between the two sets of activity but did identify multiple open-source links between AlphaPro and the ISPR. We also note that many of the key narratives advanced by both networks - including praise for Pakistan’s armed forces and attacks against India - are the same, suggesting the two operations may have been parallel efforts with a shared strategic goal.

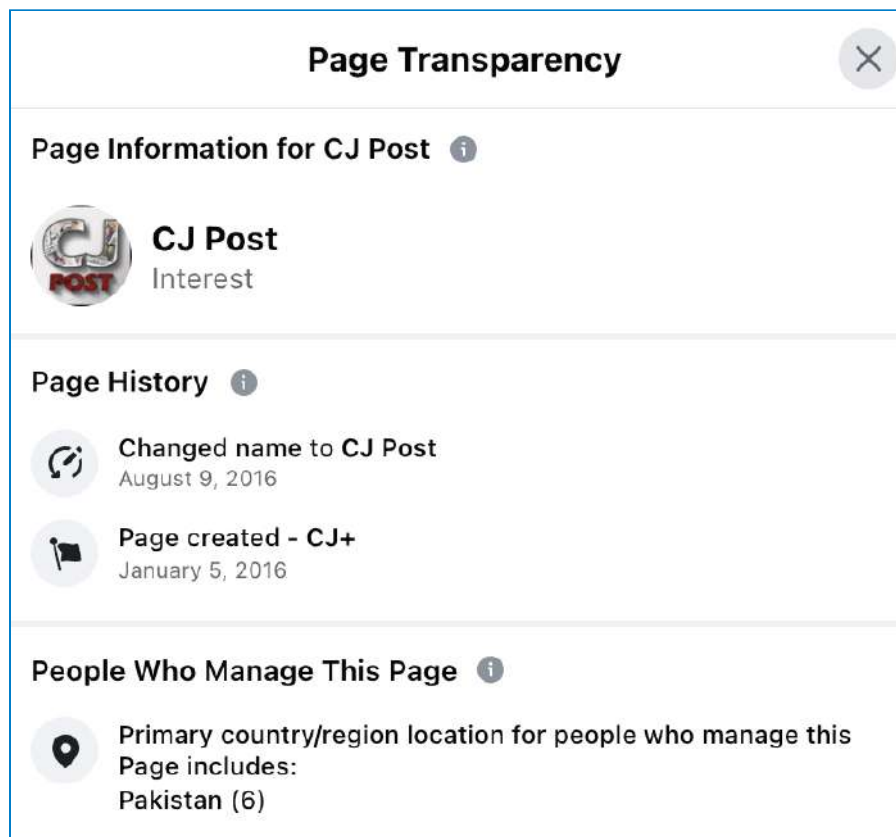
The newly-identified network provides yet another example of the role commercial marketing firms play in online influence campaigns, highlighting their ability to conduct hands-on-keyboard operations while providing plausible deniability to clients who wish to remain one step removed. The accounts in this campaign also posed as independent media outlets and created original video content featuring paid actors and freelance journalists, demonstrating how political interests can trade on the values of a free press to covertly advance their own agendas.

Facebook shared the full set of accounts, pages, and profiles with Graphika for further analysis before removing them from its platforms, building on earlier investigations we conducted into a suspected influence operation in Pakistan. Below is a summary of our key findings:

- The network centered around a group of 25 Facebook pages, most of which presented themselves as independent news outlets and media brands. These pages were then promoted by profiles in the set that liked and reshared their content.
- Multiple accounts engaged in further deceptive behavior, such as using fake identities and stolen profile pictures, some of which had been altered to obscure the original source.
- Most of the pages posted what appeared to be originally-created video content, often featuring professional script readers and freelance journalists acting as presenters and news anchors. It was not clear to what extent, if any, the individuals were aware of their role in the identified influence operation.
- We found multiple connections between accounts in the set and AlphaPro, a digital marketing firm based in Islamabad, Pakistan. These included now-suspended accounts that belonged to AlphaPro employees, pages promoting content produced by AlphaPro, and elements of the political influence operation which overlapped with marketing efforts supporting the company's commercial clients.
- Key narratives advanced by the network included: praise for Pakistan and its armed forces; efforts to denigrate India and highlight attacks by Hindu nationalists targeting religious minorities; support for Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan; and promotion of the government-backed China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) investment project.

## The Set

As a set, the accounts and pages identified by Facebook showed clear signs of coordination, as well as using fake identities and other deceptive practices to mislead users. At least 12 of the pages, for example, presented themselves as independent media outlets based in Pakistan without acknowledging that they were operated by a PR firm to advance set political narratives. These pages were almost exclusively administered by users in Pakistan, suggesting the network primarily acted as a domestic influence operation rather than an attempt at foreign interference.



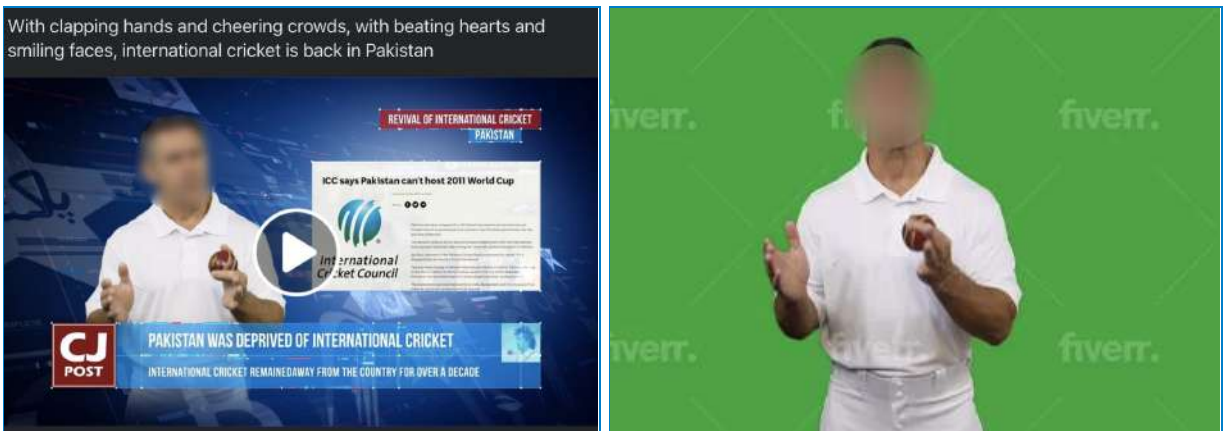
*Page transparency information for the CJ Post, showing six admins in Pakistan and name changes over time*

Pakistan Media Check and the other purported media outlets published in English, Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, German, French, and Russian about Pakistani politics and current affairs. Their collective focus seemed to be the creation and dissemination of original video content, as well as other memes and local press articles which aligned with the pages' pro-government and military bias. These posts were then liked and reshared by other pages and profiles in the takedown set.

Much of the video content took the form of short news bulletins, where a presenter addressed the audience directly from a virtual TV studio to narrate over a package of film footage, photos and

screenshots of media articles. On multiple occasions, Graphika was able to identify the news anchor as either a pro-government journalist working in Pakistan, or a script reader available to hire on [fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com) - a website offering freelance production services.

For instance, one of the most-frequently featured news anchors was a man identified as “Andrew Hamilton” who appeared in multiple videos shared by pages in the set. The fictional newsreader, however, is played by a Cuban-born American actor who is one of the top-rated providers of “Spokesperson Videos” on fiverr. The actor offers a range of script-reading and voiceover services for prices starting at around \$25, and has appeared in TV shows including NCIS New Orleans and From Dusk Till Dawn.

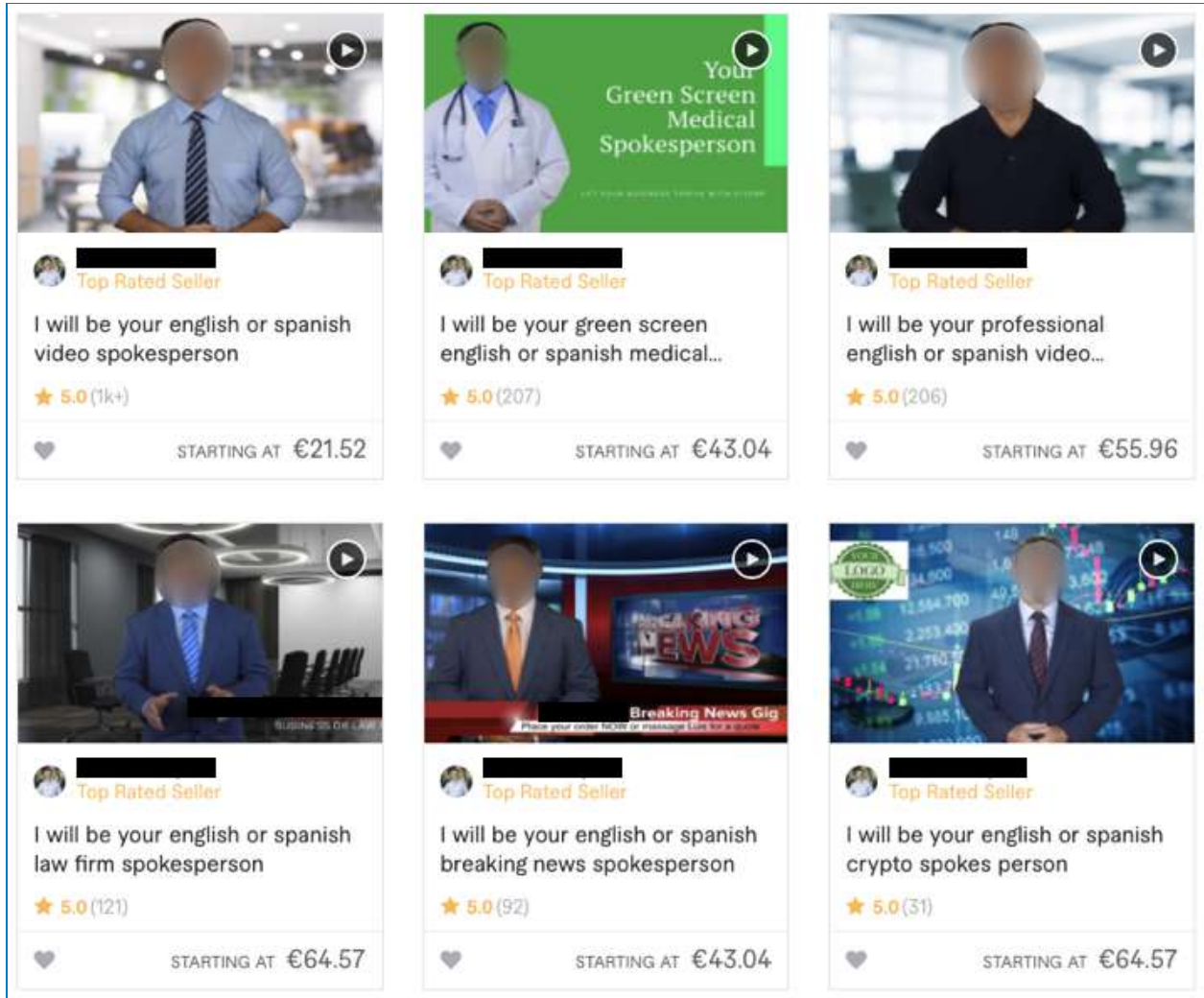


Presenter “Andrew Hamilton” appears in a video for CJ Post, a fake media outlet included in the takedown set (left). The real actor poses in front of a green screen in the same outfit on fiverr.com (right)



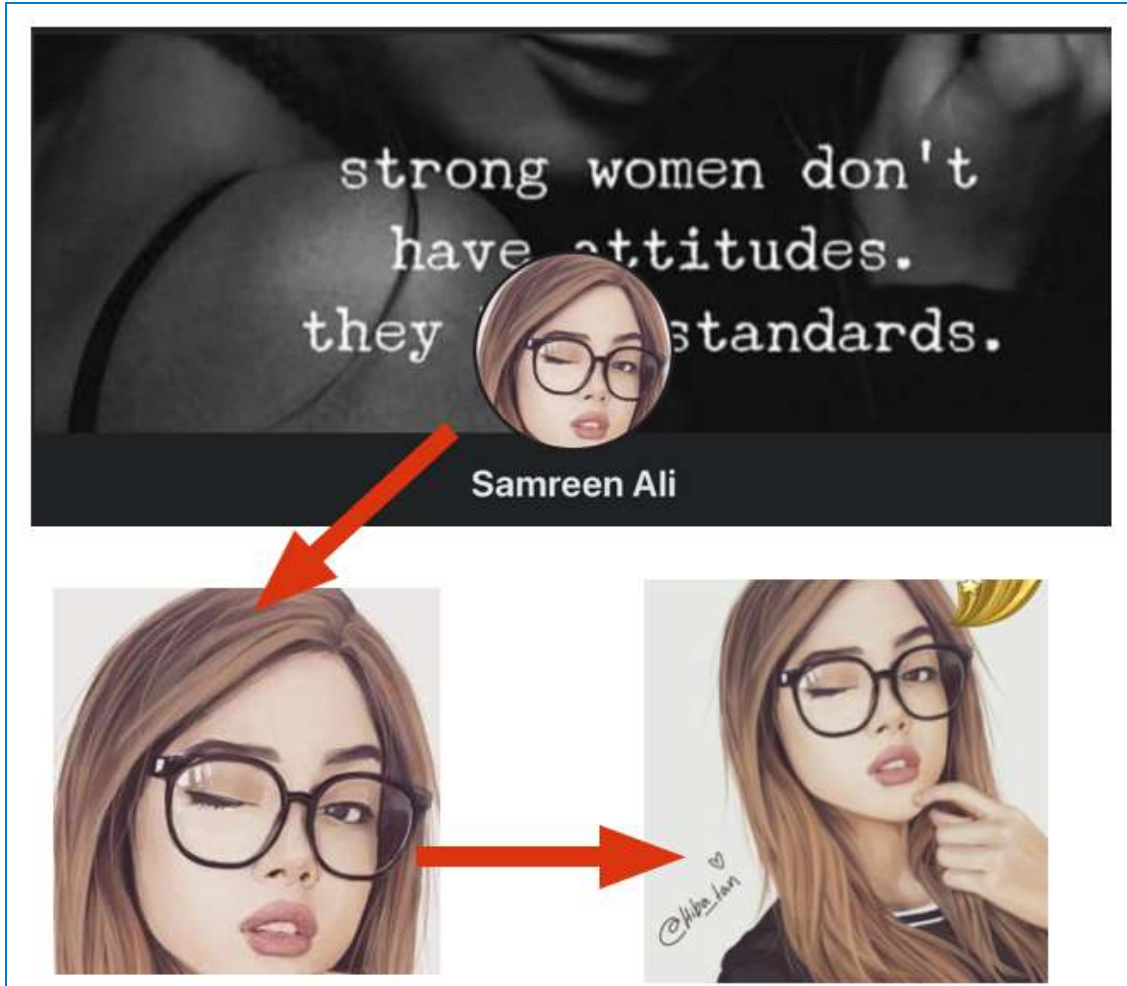
The same actor featured in the banner photo of The Influentials, a page included in the takedown set





*Services offered by the actor on fiverr.com*

The Facebook profiles and Instagram accounts in the set tended to fall into one of two categories. Some appeared to be authentic and belong to employees of AlphaPro, the marketing firm identified by Facebook. Others were thinly-developed, likely fake, personas that were often friends with each other and primarily engaged in liking and resharing content produced by the fake media outlets. Interestingly, a number of accounts in this second category used generic stock photos which had been closely-cropped or altered, possibly in an attempt to make the original source harder to identify.



*Facebook profile for "Samreen Ali" - a thinly-developed persona included in the takedown set that used a cropped version of widely-available illustration as a profile picture*

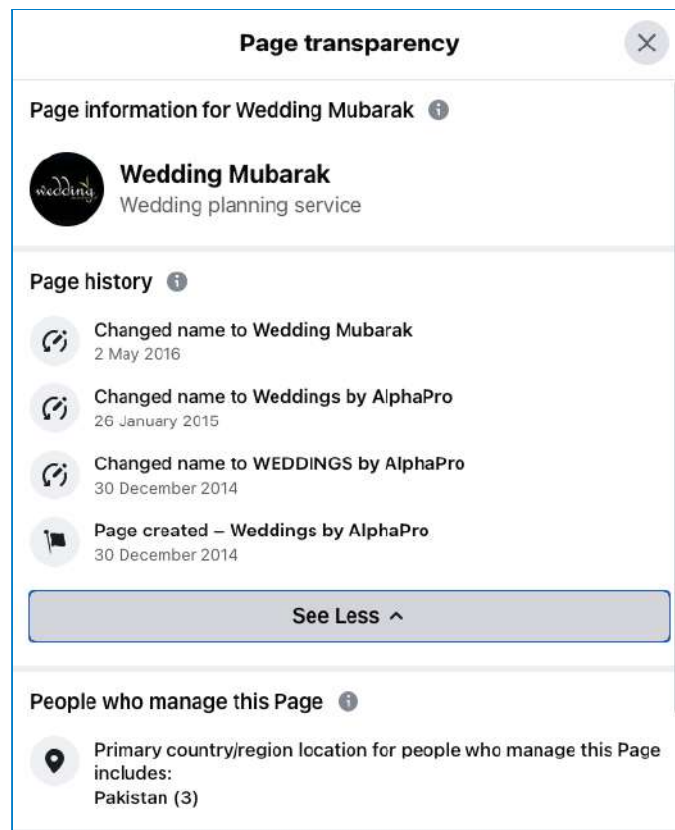
The majority of pages in the set identified by Facebook were created in 2020 but others had operated since 2011. The Facebook profiles and Instagram accounts covered a similarly broad timescale, with some dating back to 2011-2013, and others created as recently as May this year.

While some of the pages only gathered a couple of hundred likes and followers, two of the fake media outlets managed to build significant audiences. Pakistan Media Check had 256,000 followers by the time it was suspended, and purported online news journal CJ Post had 316,000. Overall, Facebook said around 800,000 accounts followed one or more of the pages, and about 2,400 users followed one or more of the Instagram accounts.

# AlphaPro

AlphaPro is a digital marketing firm based in Islamabad, Pakistan, that bills itself as a “one-stop-shop” providing “turn-key” social media services to a host of corporate and government clients. According to the company’s website, these services include conceiving and promoting online campaigns, as well as the “development and management of digital assets i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.” The firm operates its own accounts on [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#), but its [Twitter](#) profile was suspended at some point in the last year.

AlphaPro’s website says it has been providing “a broad range of communication solutions” since 2016. Prior to this, the company appears to have operated as an events organizer specializing in weddings. The Facebook page for a company called Wedding Mubarak lists the same office as AlphaPro and shows it previously traded as “Weddings by AlphaPro.”



*The Facebook page for Wedding Mubarak, which lists the same address as AlphaPro’s LinkedIn page and shows it was previously called “Weddings by AlphaPro”*

Graphika found multiple connections between AlphaPro and accounts included in the takedown set, corroborating Facebook’s attribution to “individuals associated” with the company. One of the profiles identified by Facebook, for example, belonged to the firm’s managing director and another



was the account of a person credited as the assistant director on some of the company's public-facing film projects. One of the Facebook-identified pages, Asal Baat, also shared a video in 2018 championing the cause of Kashmiri rebels that was produced by AlphaPro and displayed the company's logo.

Despite only listing six employees on LinkedIn, AlphaPro boasts an impressive roster of clients. Those listed on its website range from state-owned Chinese infrastructure firms to NGOs, universities, and parts of the Pakistani government, including the ISPR. In addition to this public client relationship with the Pakistani military, Graphika identified at least four former and current AlphaPro employees who previously worked at the ISPR before joining the company. On one occasion, the official ISPR Facebook page was even suggested as a "related page" when viewing assets included in the takedown set.

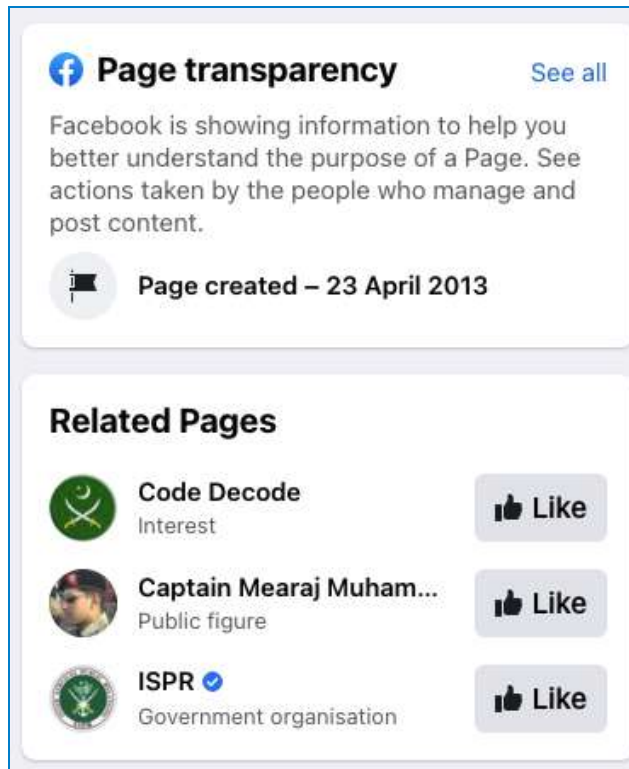
While ultimately circumstantial, it is worth noting that multiple narratives advanced by the identified network align with the strategic interests of AlphaPro clients. These have included praise for the Pakistani armed forces and promotion of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project.

**Clients**

Our diverse client portfolio can be best presented, classified into the following categories:

- Commercial Sector Clients**
  - Zong (China Mobile Pakistan)
  - Power China Hub (CPHGC)
  - Port Qasim Electric Power Company Private Ltd (Power China)
  - MOL Oil & Gas
  - Philip Morris International (PMI)
  - Mobilink, PMCL
  - CinegoldPlex, Bahria Town, Rawalpindi
  - Garden City, Bahria Town, Rawalpindi
- Social Sector Clients/Projects**
  - Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability (TEDA) (3<sup>rd</sup> Party Client)
  - Women Action (3<sup>rd</sup> Party Client)
  - SPRING Association
- Public Sector Clients/Projects**
  - Inter Services Public Relations, Pakistan Army
  - City District Government, Rawalpindi
  - WASA, Rawalpindi
- Educational Sector Clients/Projects**
  - Military College, Jehlum
  - Cadit College Choa Saidan Shah, Chalwal
  - SASSI University, Islamabad
  - University of Arid and Agriculture, Rawalpindi
  - COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad
- Startups/Projects**
  - DAIG – Pakistan's First Online Catering Website (daig.com.pk)
  - AlNaseebDryFruits – Online Dry Fruit Website (alnaseebdryfruits.com)
  - ThePakistanAffairs – Online News Website (thepakistanaffairs.com)
- International Clients/Projects**
  - Hedaya – Community Magazine for Muslims in Cradley Heath, UK
  - Muslim Welfare Organization UK

AlphaPro's client list on its [website](#)



*"Related Pages" suggested by Facebook when viewing the now-suspended Social Justice page*

One prominent example of AlphaPro's work with the Pakistani government is its production of a documentary last year called "[Invincible Resolve](#)." Released in February 2020, on the one-year anniversary of border clashes between India and Pakistan, the 37-minute film salutes the "heroes" of the Pakistani Air Force who defended their country from "Indian aggression." Through digitized reenactments and interviews, defense officials and Prime Minister Imran Khan are shown undertaking bold and decisive actions against a belligerent and hostile India.

Invincible Resolve was posted to AlphaPro's YouTube channel (where it has received over 80,000 views to date) on Feb. 26, one day before it was shown by [state broadcaster PTV](#). Though obscured in the AlphaPro version, the PTV screening shows the company produced the film on behalf of Pakistan's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and the Pakistan Air Force Directorate of Media Affairs. AlphaPro employees whose accounts were included in the takedown set also worked on the production team.

#InvincibleResolve #AlanWarnes #AlphaPro  
 Invincible Resolve | Complete Documentary on Operation Swift Retort 27 Feb 2019 | Alan Warnes  
 82,555 views • 26 Feb 2020

Production Coordinator  
S. M. Farooq

Assistant DP  
M. Usman Farooq

Agency  
Alpha Pro & Rapid Media

Syed Muhammad Ali  
M. Baroni  
Iqbal & Ishtiaq

Directorate Media Affairs, PAF

Special Thanks to  
Syed Muhammad Ali

شیر دل سکواڈرن نے فضا میں پاکستانی پرچم کے سبز و سفید رجا  
 ڈی آر ایف  
 news.ptv.com.pk

PTV is a Pakistani public broadcast service. [Wikipedia](#)

INVINCIBLE RESOLVE PAF DOCUMENTARY 27 02 2020  
 6,215 views • 27 Feb 2020

A Presentation of  
 Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

PTV  
 news

05:47 PM  
 news.ptv.com.pk

PTV is a Pakistani public broadcast service. [Wikipedia](#)

INVINCIBLE RESOLVE PAF DOCUMENTARY 27 02 2020  
 6,215 views • 27 Feb 2020

Screenshots from the documentary *Invincible Resolve* posted to YouTube by AlphaPro and PTV

# Narratives

The content produced and disseminated by the network adhered to a clear political agenda that presented Pakistan as a strong and successful nation, and sought to advance the interests of its government and armed forces. The narratives broadly fell into six main categories:

## Proud Pakistan

The now-suspended pages and profiles promoted content that stoked pride in Pakistan as a strong and independent nation. News reports shared by the network declared the country had entered "a new era of progress and economic opportunities" at home as its diplomatic profile was on the rise internationally. The consistently pro-state coverage never missed a chance to trumpet national victories and successes, ranging from military accomplishments on the battlefield to international cricket and securing foreign investment. Videos often used the national flag as a background image, or incorporated dramatic historical footage related to Pakistan's struggle for independence.



Posts by Facebook-identified pages CJ Post and Lost Virsa promoting Pakistan's successes

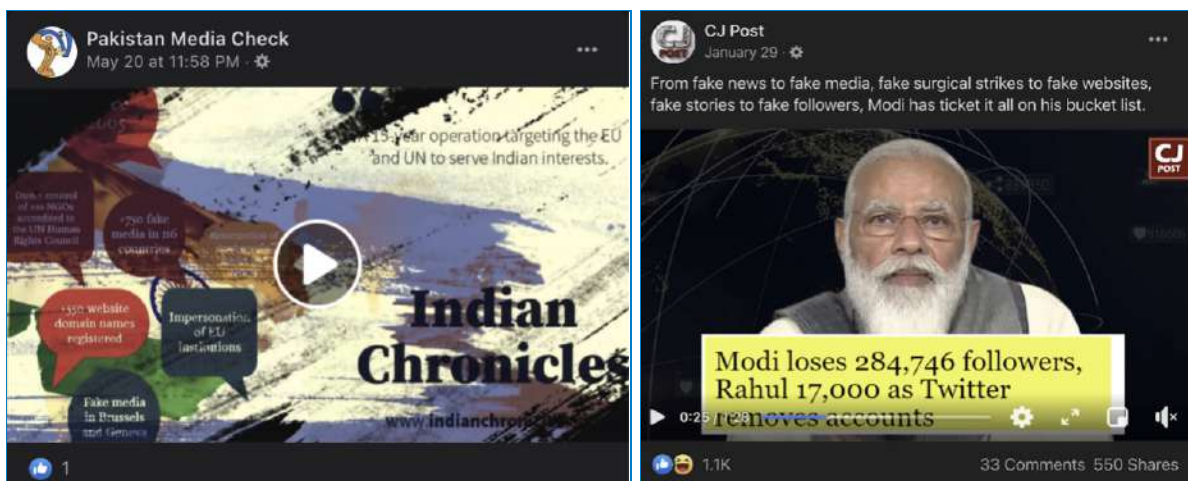
## Anti-India

All of the pages and profiles identified by Facebook regularly attacked India, its government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The fake media outlets in the network, in particular, were heavily focused on exposing alleged human rights abuses conducted by Indian troops in Jammu and Kashmir, highlighting Hindu nationalist attacks against religious minorities, and portraying New Delhi as increasingly isolated on the international stage. The accounts also gave extensive coverage to the [Indian farmers' protests](#) earlier this year and argued that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was leading the country towards "fascism" and "electoral autocracy."

Interestingly, given its position at the center of Facebook's latest takedown, the network also heavily promoted a 2020 [report](#) by the EU Disinfo Lab that exposed a global disinformation campaign supporting Indian political interests and attacking Pakistan.



*A cartoon posted by page Social Justice in May 2019 criticising atrocities reportedly committed by Indian armed forces in Kashmir*



*Posts by pages Pakistan Media Check and the CJ Post promoting the EU Disinfo Lab's "Indian Chronicles" report in 2020*



## Support for Imran Khan

The network routinely featured coverage supportive of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. This included soundbites from interviews with Khan and major policy announcements that were reposted by the accounts. It also shared “news bulletins” produced by the fake media outlets that praised Khan’s response to Covid-19 while criticizing efforts made by the Indian government. From an international perspective, Khan was depicted as a reliable leader who was well regarded from Beijing to Washington.



*Screenshot of the CJ Post promoting a video clip of Khan laughing when asked to compare his government to that of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi*

## Enemies of the State

Hundreds of posts called out prominent individuals in Pakistani politics and social movements, whose “traitorous” actions allegedly threatened “national unity.” Prior to Khan’s election victory in 2018, one of the most heavily-targeted individuals was his predecessor Nawaz Sharif, who was accused of longstanding corruption. Once Khan took office, however, the network began targeting other groups and individuals critical of his government’s actions. These have included local activists, journalists and foreign NGOs concerned about Pakistan’s treatment of minority citizens. Often, targets were smeared as agents of foreign intelligence services seeking to sow discord and undermine Pakistan.



*A post by the Facebook-identified page Islamabad Press attacking Nawaz Sharif over corruption allegations. The video was posted shortly before Pakistan’s 2018 election with the caption: “Must watch before voting.”*

## Military Matters

The pages and profiles identified by Facebook churned out a steady stream of coverage favorable to Pakistan’s armed forces and intelligence services. Many of these posts were news bulletin-style videos produced by the fake media outlets, which covered incidents ranging from “counter-terror operations” against Baloch Liberation Army militants to the mobilization of Pakistani troops following Indian artillery shelling near the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. Other posts honored “martyrs” who had died during active service, recounted historical battlefield victories, and emphasized the military’s role in the fight against Covid-19.



A cartoon posted by the Pakistan Media Check page showing Pakistan's ISI intelligence service protecting the nation from Indian-backed militants while its people sleep

## Chinese Investment

A notable deviation from the network's core narratives of Pakistani nationalism and pro-government cheerleading was its focus on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is a collection of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects across Pakistan that began in 2015 and represents a [core pillar](#) of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The pages and profiles identified by Facebook frequently referred to the investment project in positive terms, portraying it as an effort that would modernize and strengthen Pakistan. One prominent example was the CPEC-funded port at Gwadar, which fake media outlet the CJ Post repeatedly told viewers would make Pakistan "the centre-point for world trade."

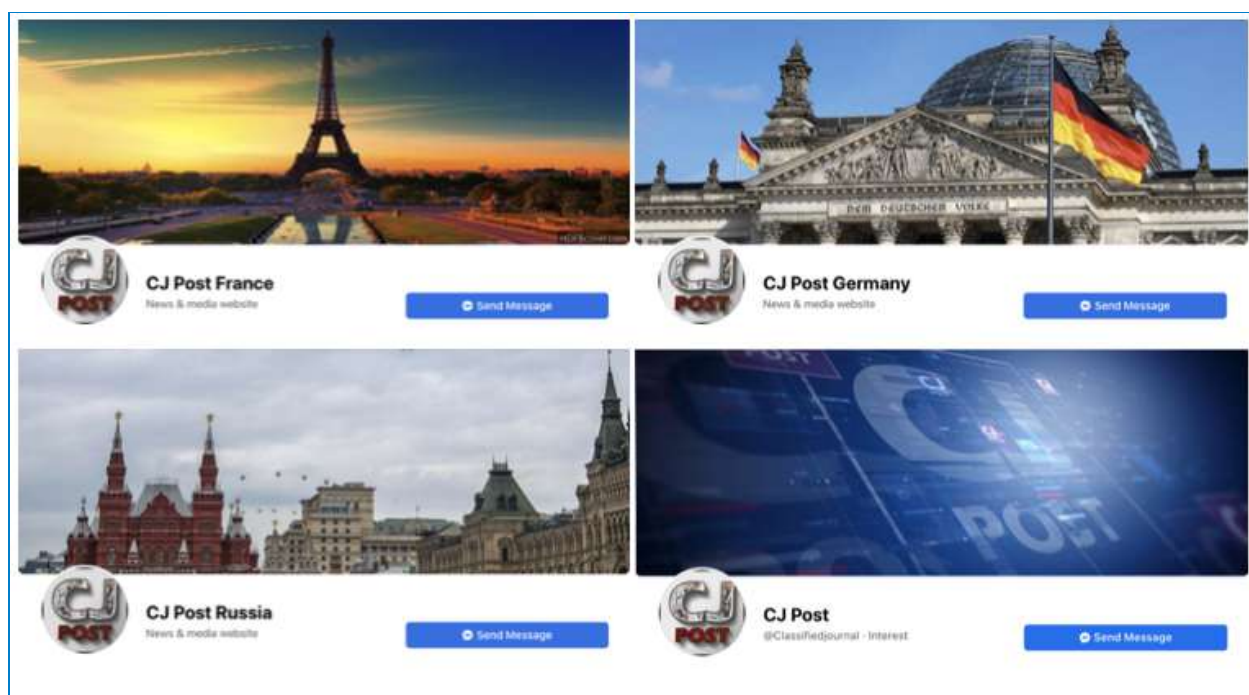
This activity appears to have been separate from the political influence campaign but still aligned with the strategic interests of AlphaPro's commercial clients. The company has previously produced promotional materials for CPEC and names three Chinese companies directly involved in the project as clients on its [website](#): Zong (China Mobile Pakistan), Power China Hub (China Power Hub Generation Company, Ltd.), and Port Qasim Electric Power Company Private Ltd (Power China). In May 2020, one AlphaPro employee whose Facebook account was included in the takedown set even travelled to China to help produce a CPEC-distributed [film](#) called "Pledge of The Iron Brothers - Pak-China Friendship."

## Knock-off News Pages

The network identified by Facebook revolved around a cluster of fake media outlets, some of which maintained multiple pages and accounts. All of the outlets promoted content aligned with the narratives described above, with many posting originally-created videos featuring the same paid actors. Below are the main entities identified in the operation.

### CJ Post

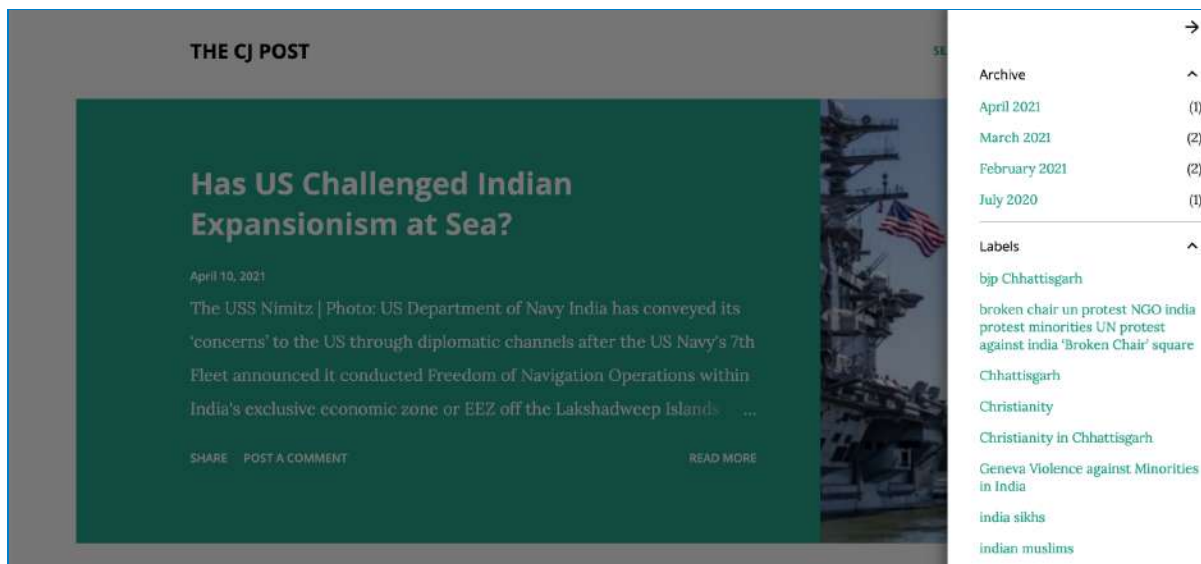
The most prolific fake media outlet included in the takedown set was the CJ Post, which was also active on Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, and ran six Facebook pages operating in English, Pashto, Arabic, German French and Russian. Only the English-language page, however, had a significant online presence. The German, French, and Russian pages were all created on 19 July, 2020, and only posted one video - dubbed into each of the three languages - before seemingly being abandoned. The Arabic and Pashto pages were similarly under-developed and had less than 3,000 followers each.



*Pages for CJ Post's internationally focused outlets*

The main CJ Post page was created in January 2016 as CJ+, with CJ apparently standing for "Casual Justice" before settling on its current branding of "Classified Journal." The page describes itself as an outlet that will "bring those hot issues to you that are ignored in the main stream media, News (sic) that needs equal attention!" At no point does the outlet declare its ownership or any political affiliation.

The CJ Post website - [cjpost\[.\]co.uk](http://cjpost[.]co.uk) - was first registered in February 2019 and uses an uninspiring Blogger template, with no information about the outlet or its operators. Unusually for a news source, it only publishes intermittently and hosts a grand total of six articles. All of those articles are concerned with one of three issues: Kashmiri independence and abuses its people have suffered at the hands of the Indian military, human rights violations involving religious minorities in India, and alleged diplomatic tensions between India and the United States.



*A screenshot of [cjpost\[.\]co.uk](http://cjpost[.]co.uk) showing only six articles posted between July 2020 - April 2021*

Graphika also found a Facebook group, which had the same name, profile picture, and description as the CJ Post's English-language page. The group, which was created in May 2020 and has since been suspended, asked its 2,400 members to invite friends and post their own content "so that True and Factual News can reach Everyone." The administrators were a profile and a page posing as a person, both of which used the same name but showed different people in their display photos. The profile's photo appeared to be stolen from a Cuban EDM DJ, despite claiming to belong to an Australian man living in London.

Of the pages in the set, the CJ Post was the most frequent producer of videos featuring actors hired on [fiverr.com](http://fiverr.com). In addition to the example detailed above, Graphika identified three professional script readers and voiceover artists who advertised their services on [fiverr](http://fiverr.com) and appeared in CJ Post videos using different names.





*A French-American actor appears in a CJ Post video (left) and against a green screen on fiverr (right)*

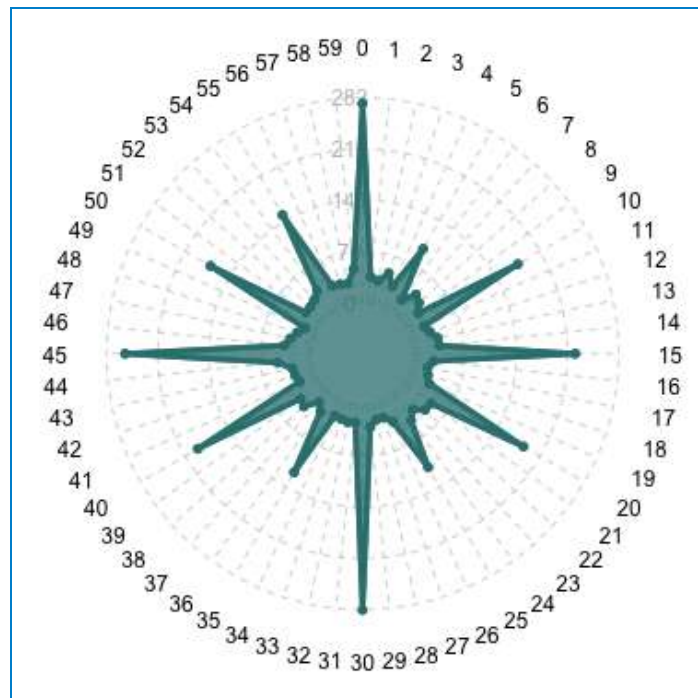
One of the actors repeatedly received positive reviews on fiverr from a user who commented to praise their performance in clips that exactly matched video footage later used by the CJ Post. Graphika was not able to determine if the fiverr user was directly connected to the CJ Post, but did note that one of the two accounts they used listed its location as Pakistan.

## Pakistan Media Check

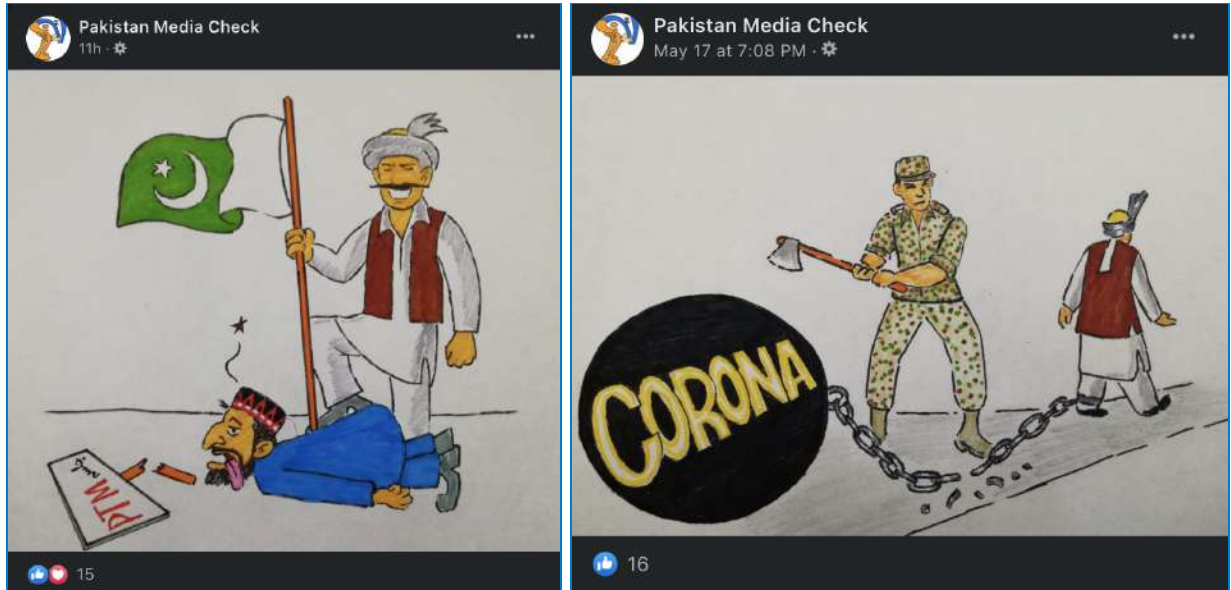
After the CJ Post, the second most-popular page in the network was Pakistan Media Check, which was created in 2011 as “Youth Campaign against JEW TV [Official]” before changing to its current name in 2015. The page presented itself as a TV channel and mostly shared short videos, memes and cartoon images that were posted at regular 5 minute intervals throughout the day, showing a pattern of behavior typically associated with automated activity.

All of the content aligned with narratives advanced by the wider network. Most recently, the page shared a series of cartoons mocking the [Pashtun Tahafuz Movement](#) and denouncing its leader as an agent of Indian and U.S. intelligence services. Other posts glorified the Pakistani military and sought to denigrate former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistan Media Check also regularly reposted content from another page not included in the takedown set called Tribal Press, which describes itself as an “online channel covering culture, tourism, education, health” in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region.



*Hourly posting times for Pakistan Media Check showing the page posting in regular 5 minute intervals*



Recent posts by Pakistan Media Check attacking the PTM and praising the Pakistani military

## Poorv Files

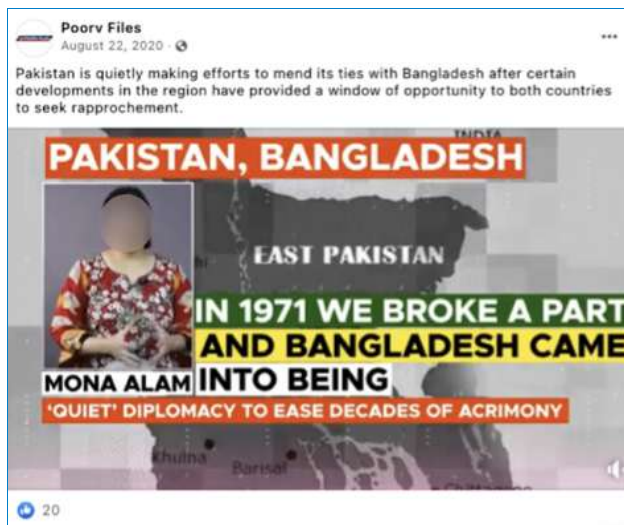
Poorv Files (Eastern Files) is another state-aligned “news outlet” that published short videos on its Facebook page and an associated YouTube channel. The Facebook page was created in May 2020 with four administrators in Pakistan and featured the outlet’s compass logo and “Voice of the East” tagline in its banner image.

Most videos took the form of short “news bulletins” presented by an anchor in a virtual TV studio, similar to the CJ Post, and focused on Pakistan’s rivalry with India. Recent topics included India’s “illegal occupation” of Kashmir, New Delhi’s isolation in international affairs, and Pakistan’s success developing bilateral relations with regional allies.

In contrast to the CJ Post, however, Poorv Files videos usually featured real and relatively well-known media personalities working in Pakistan. The three individuals who appeared most frequently in the outlet’s videos are all freelance journalists supportive of the government. Two previously worked at state broadcaster PTV, and one even helped produce a military documentary made by AlphaPro.



The now-suspended Facebook page for Poorv Files



Two videos posted by Poorv Files that feature freelance journalists working in Pakistan

## Asal Baat

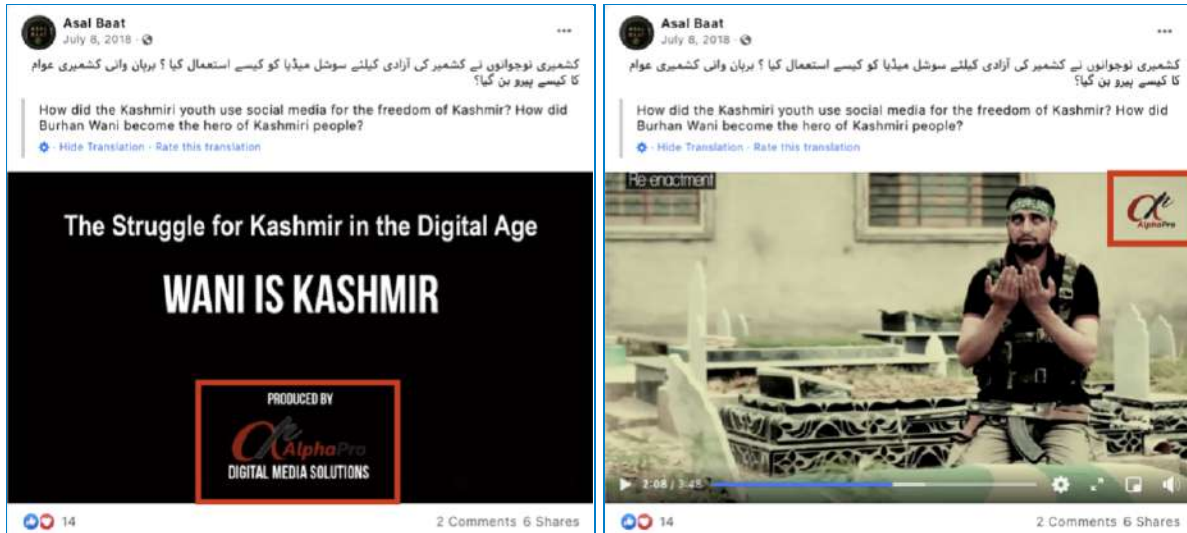
Asal Baat - which translates to “Real Talk” - labelled itself as a “Media/News Company” while exclusively publishing politically-themed video content about domestic and geopolitical issues in Pakistan. Its posts frequently targeted the Indian government, particularly the Indian defense and intelligence agencies, and attacked “corrupt” Pakistani politicians acting against the national interest. The page took particular aim against former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the eve of

the 2018 Pakistani elections, publishing a series of videos showing residents in Lahore talking about his shortcomings.

In July 2018, Asal Baat also posted a video titled “The Struggle for Kashmir in the Digital Age: Wani Is Kashmir,” which was produced by AlphaPro and displays the company’s logo in the top right-hand corner. Wani refers to Kashmiri rebel [Burhan Wani](#), who was killed by Indian forces in July 2016.



The Asal Baat page identifying itself as a “Media/News Company”



Screenshots from the video “The Struggle for Kashmir in the Digital Age: Wani Is Kashmir” posted by Asal Baat in July 2018 and showing the AlphaPro name and logo (red highlight by Graphika)

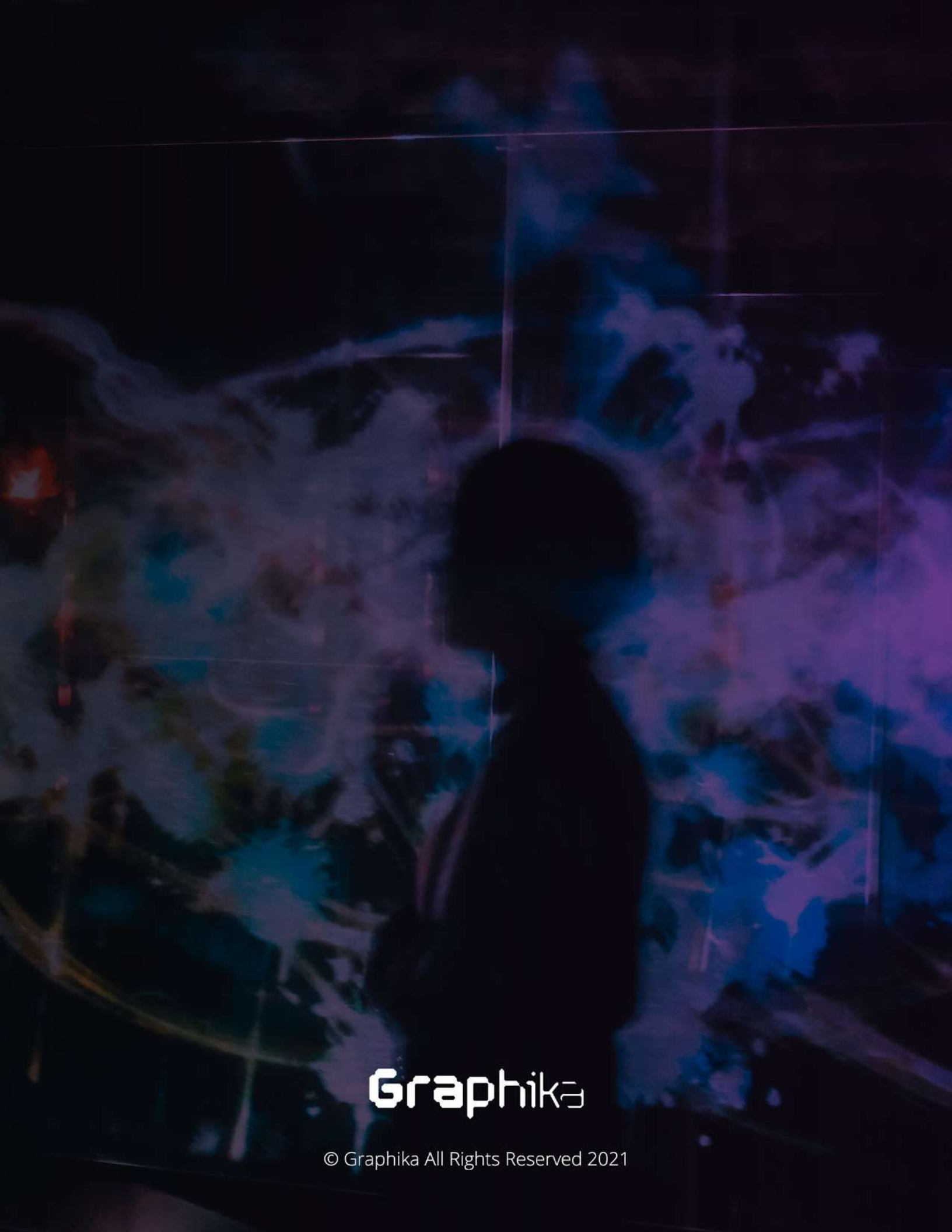


## Aik Minute Aik Khabar

Aik Minute Aik Khabar translates as “A News A Minute” and was an Urdu-language page created in 2015. The page described itself as a “news personality” and almost exclusively posted short, captioned news videos that were just over a minute long and likely intended to be viewed on a mobile phone. Narratives advanced by the page were usually supportive of the Pakistani government and critical of India, as well as targeting domestic dissidents and disputing international criticism of human rights violations in Pakistan.



Posts by the page Aik Minute Aik Khabar



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